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As Shuttle Orbits, a Debate Grows Over Military's Role

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla., Oct. 5 — As five military officers on the space shuttle Atlantis orbit the earth on a secret mission, a debate is growing in the United States over how much secrecy is necessary in the civilian-run space program and what the military's role in it should be.

Proponents of an expanded role for the Defense Department say the United States needs to counter a growing Soviet threat in space. They say the Soviet Union conducts four to five times as many space launching a year as the United States, with the vast majority of missions devoted to military objectives. Soviet military officers have, all together, logged years in space, they say, while the American military has logged days.

Secrecy is essential, they add, to the success of the Defense Department's space activities.

U.S. Advantage Cited

Critics of an expanded Pentagon role say the United States already has an enormous advantage in military space technology and therefore a further push now is unwarranted. American systems work better and last longer, they say, pointing out that the Russians are still trying to to perfect a space shuttle. These critics contend that the military's assertions about the Soviet Union are often veiled excuses to try to edge civilians out of the astronaut corps and to classify the most mundane shuttle payloads.

They say the goal of secrecy is not heightened security but greater protection of the Pentagon's plans and programs from public scrutiny.

Already simmering, the debate is likely to heat up as the military expands its manned space activity. According to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, secret military missions will account for 25 to 30 percent of all shuttle flights in the next decade. The current shuttle mission is the second devoted exclusively to military objectives.

"Nobody doubts that a certain amount of secrecy is absolutely necessary," said Sissela Bok, a philosopher at Brandeis University who has written about Government secrecy. "But secrecy can also be a weapon in the hands of an aggressive military. It's dangerous domestically as well. When citizens lose information they lose control of weapons that can endanger them."

Carl Sagan, professor of astronomy and space sciences at Cornell University, says there is a "fundamental tension" between open scientific inquiry and "the necessarily closed world of military activities."

"As military programs expand," he said, "there's a huge deflection of resources, financial and intellectual, from peaceful uses into the production of weapons."

People who back a greater military role in space, like Daniel O. Graham, a retired Army lieutenant general who formerly headed the Defense Intelligence Agency, disagree, saying the military has been at the forefront of American space exploration since its earliest days. "The myth since the Eisenhower Administration is that there's a distinction between military and civilian matters in space," he said. "That's a pretense that a lot of people in NASA would like to believe, that all their activities are sweetness and light."

Military Role 'Not Sinister'

Edward C. Aldridge Jr., Under Secretary of the Air Force, said the military use of space "is not sinister" but "a fundamental part of the foundation upon which we build a strong national defense."

The current shuttle mission's primary goal is widely reported to be the launching of a pair of $100 million communication satellites. In the first all-military mission, in January, the shuttle Discovery launched what was reported to be a $300 million advanced spy satellite meant to pick up electronic signals.

All Defense Department shuttle missions are to be secret. No information is publicly given about payloads, mission objectives, exact launching times or flight durations. Pentagon officials say the secrecy is needed to keep the Soviet military from monitoring launchings and discovering the nature of missions. On rare occasions a secret shuttle flight may be declassified, Air Force officials say.

Future military flights are to include the launching of satellites for navigation, weather forecasting and reconnaissance, according to aerospace experts. In addition, spy satellites are to be repaired and refueled. Laser weapons are to be tested and science experiments done, including many for the advanced antimissile shield proposed by President Reagan.

Most Astronauts in Military

Such Defense Department tasks are to be performed by NASA's astronauts, some 60 percent of whom are active-duty military officers. Assisting them will be the separate astronaut corps of the Air Force.

Reliance on military officers, long a space agency custom, has lately come under fire, as in a letter a Houston man, Al Stewart, wrote to the respected magazine Aviation Week & Space Technology. "NASA's most recent selections of astronaut candidates should be viewed with alarm by everyone interested in America's space program being an open one," he wrote. "Eight of the thirteen just chosen were military officers, while the other five were all NASA employees."

"No matter how qualified," he added, "an applicant from civilian science, industry, or the universities apparently has no chance to become a career astronaut. NASA is not just passing up a lot of good talent. It seems to be establishing a precedent that may alienate part of the agency's own constituency."

Soon the Air Force will have, at a cost of $2.9 billion, its own shuttle launching facility at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. The first mission from there, scheduled for March, is reportedly to carry two payloads of importance to the antimissile shield proposal. It will also carry Under Secretary Aldridge, who will be the first high-ranking Pentagon official to fly aboard a space shuttle.

Military missions are now controlled by the Air Force's 200-member Manned Space Flight Support Group, which has joined the NASA ground controllers at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. Future missions are to be run by the Air Force's $1.4 billion Consolidated Space Operations Center in Colorado, which is expected to employ 3,000 people by 1990.

'Public's Right' at Stake

"There's a real question of how the decision was made to move the space agency from being open to substantially closed," said Morton H. Halperin, director of the Washington office of the American Civil Liberties Union. "What's at stake is the public's right to participate in the process of making Government policy."

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In rebuttal, Pentagon officials say that the "militarization of space" seen by the critics is a myth and that the Defense Department has for decades led the way in space exploration, producing the nation's first rockets.

Yet even military proponents see emerging tensions in the manned space program. "The original legislation creating the agency specified a civilian space program, separate from the military," said an editorial in Aviation Week & Space Technology, written by William H. Gregory, editor. "That line is being crossed now not so much as a formal policy change as out of simple economic necessity. The shuttle needs the military as a customer to spread the system's overhead costs."

Noting the problems posed by secrecy, Mr. Gregory added, "The time has come for facing the question of whether NASA should continue to operate the shuttle."

A Protest by Scientists

Some critics fear that the space agency's charter for free and open dissemination of scientific information is being eroded as the military's role grows. Scientists protested loudly and ineffectually last year when NASA announced that images from a large camera and radar carried on a civilian shuttle mission were to be reviewed and possibly censored by the space agency's Defense Department Affairs Division.

Even more contentious is the debate over the complete secrecy that surrounds shuttle missions devoted to the military, the Pentagon insisting that it is necessary for national security.

Critics contend that secrecy is instead sometimes used to stifle public debate. In the absence of NASA disclosures about the Atlantis mission, the Federation of American Scientists, a private group, put out its own press release about the flight's secret goal.

"The current U.S. policy of not announcing military shuttle payloads does not prevent the Soviets from identifying these satellites, even as it has not prevented us from doing so with public sources alone," the press release said. "This policy only inhibits public awareness and discussion of U.S. military activities in space."